

FINDING THE RIGHT PERSON:
IT'S ALL ATTITUDE

Bruce Olson first became a company president at 34. Ten years before he was a branch manager, and a few years before he worked in the company warehouse.

Now the chief at another company, Progressive Alloy Steels Unlimited (www.progressivealloy.com) in Hartsford, S.C., Olson is self-effacing. "I'm not smarter than anyone else," he says. "I just always did the work, and I always asked questions."

PASU will turn seven next month, and in less than a decade the niche supplier of stainless steel has gained customers nationwide and in 24 countries.

The company president attributes PASU's tremendous growth to something that's been top-of-mind for many a metal manufacturer: finding the right people.

Key qualifications Olson looks for do not include education. All the intelligence in the world doesn't do much good without drive. Instead, he reads personalities. If they show an engaging work ethic with an eagerness to ask questions and learn, those qualities will benefit the business. In short, it's all about attitude.

Of course, metal manufacturing in all its forms requires a certain level of mechanical aptitude. But that's not Olson's primary yardstick. Bending, sawing, cutting and other processes in metal manufacturing can be taught—particularly to a person hungry to learn.

Olson learned this at a previous company, which was going through a restructuring. His reflex action was to hire people he knew, those with experience. But he soon found



Bruce Olson, president of Progressive Alloy Steels Unlimited.

he had made the wrong move.

"There was nothing wrong with the people," he says.

"They just couldn't get out of the old mold. After that, I thought I would be better off hiring inexperienced people and putting them through training."

Candidates must exude a hunger to learn, to absorb everything about the job. "It's like being an infant," he says.

"From the time you're one day old to the time you're two days old, believe it or not, you know twice as much as you did the day before."

He concedes judging personality is subjective and far from perfect. It requires intuition among hiring managers who during interviews can separate earnest, engaging people from what Olson calls the "good actors."

"You have to admit, we've all hired *those* people," he quips.

To avoid this, he meets with prospective employees three

times: first in an office setting, the second in a casual setting and the third time in the office again.

After three visits, Olson says he can draw a somewhat clear picture of the person's character and work ethic. And after hiring, "once you've spent enough time up front with that person, with the right individual, they just jump in." And the more questions they ask, the better.

One of his first hires came from an unlikely place. In his early 20s, he was an assistant manager at Perkins Restaurant. He interviewed for a sales position, and one statement stuck in Olson's head. "He said, 'I've got a job; I'm looking for a career.' That stuck with me, so I hired him." The former Perkins manager is now one of Olson's partners at PASU.

Another early hire came with no stainless-steel experience in 1986, when Olson was managing another steel company. His career took him to vice president of sales for a national mill, then ultimately back to Olson as a PASU partner.

After 30 years in the business, Olson still uses this technique—so much so that it intimately guides his expansion plans. Consider, for instance, that PASU recently opened operations in California. The move might sound like a carefully planned advance in the business game; plenty of aerospace companies on the West Coast have a need for specialty stainless.

"But to be frank," he says, "it wasn't some long, drawn-out plan. I just found the right person. It just made sense."

The person happened to be working for a company in a similar business. Through the grapevine, Olson learned he had an interest of changing jobs: hanging fruit, essentially. Olson made contact, flew out to California twice, and the candidate flew to South Carolina once, for both formal office and informal meetings. The candidate asked questions, was tremendously engaging, and after three meetings Olson knew he wasn't just a good actor.

Only with the right person in place would the stage be set for a California expansion. "I believe in this business, or in any business, the bricks and mortar are easy. Buying metal-cutting equipment is easy." What isn't easy, he says, are the people. "If I found the right person, I'd open in Boise, Idaho."

So where did this new hire go to college? "To be honest," says Olson, "I don't even know; I didn't ask."



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